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GOING GLOBAL IN TUSCARAWAS COUNTY

The concept of the global economy has become well understood here in the United States over the past decade. In order to thrive in today's economy, many small businesses buy and sell products throughout the world, but that was not the case 30 years ago. The late John L. Fearon and his son, Alfred, were well ahead of the curve when they started the Ohio Import Company back in 1968 in small town America Tuscarawas County, Ohio, of all places!

Ohio Import Company has eventually evolved into OIC International, and it continues to grow under the guidance of now sole-owner Alfred J. Fearon. OIC manufactures and imports floral and craft supplies for sale to wholesalers and retailers throughout North America, South America, Europe and Asia. OIC's products include flower, fruit and gift baskets, floral and craft wire, wreath adornments, PVC shrink films, and even plush toys.

Alfred and his father started the business without any formal international business training, relying on trial and error to find their way, but their method has proven successful. Success, however, did not come without its challenges. Without prior international business experience, Alfred had to do much homework to identify quality suppliers, learn customs regulations and price negotiations, and understand international letters of credit and the logistics involved with importing and exporting. This took much time and commitment. "I was growing a business at a time when my wife and I were starting our family," states Mr. Fearon. "It was many years of working 7 days a week, 10 to 14 hour days and still trying to find time to spend with my family."

In addition, financing opportunities for start-up ventures were very limited in 1968, especially for a business seeking to import and export product. This lack of capital severely slowed OIC's growth. OIC essentially financed itself on a sale by sale basis. "It was a commitment and a struggle to reinvest every available dollar back into the business," stated Mr. Fearon.

His patience, however, has paid dividends. Today, OIC has 10 full time employees, owns and operates office showrooms and warehouse facilities in both Bolivar and Strasburg, Ohio, and leases office, warehouse, and/or showroom space in other parts of Tuscarawas County, Ohio, Shenzhen, China and Dallas, Texas. Its success has made it easier for OIC to access the capital required for expansion, but the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) has also helped the company out in this area.

SBA has provided loan assistance to OIC on several occasions. In 1998, OIC tapped into SBA's 504 program to help finance the construction of a new distribution center. Then, in 2002, the 504 program helped OIC finance an expansion of the center and the addition of state of the art

showrooms and offices. “With the financial assistance and advice we received from SBA, we were able to retain jobs and add new jobs,” states Mr. Fearon. “The availability of SBA financing allowed us to expand our office and warehouse facilities in time to take advantage of current favorable interest rates and economic conditions.”

Alfred attributes OIC’s success to his hard-working, dedicated employees. OIC also strives to treat its suppliers with as much respect and courtesy as it does its customers. But OIC’s ability to build a loyal customer base starts with the excellent service it provides. “When you go the extra mile for a customer to make things happen the rewards are many,” states Mr. Fearon. “This is how we like to treat customers, large and small, when given the chance.”

OIC International encountered success in a global economy long before it became common place amongst small business owners, and Al Fearon has plans for future expansion. He had the vision in 1968 to go global, and it continues to pay dividends!

Mr. Fearon may be reached at 1-800-523-3235.